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A PLATONIC PASSAGE IN SHAKESPEARE'S *TROILUS AND CRESSIDA*

Few passages from Shakespeare's less familiar plays have been more often cited and discussed than Ulysses' great speech about "degree" in *Troilus and Cressida* (I, iii, 75-137). The explicit statement therein contained of the aristocratic theory of subordination in government has necessarily been taken account of in every consideration of Shakespeare's political point of view. Yet no critic, so far as I am aware, has called attention to the fundamentally Platonic character of much of Ulysses' speculation, or more particularly to certain specific resemblances which may perhaps count as fresh evidence in the unsettled question of Shakespeare's direct knowledge of Plato.

The lines in question are as follows:

Uly. Troy, yet upon his basis, had been down,
And the great Hector's sword had lack'd a master,
But for these instances:
The specialty of rule hath been neglected;
And, look, how many Grecian tents do stand
Hollow upon this plain, so many hollow factions.
When that the general is not like the hive
To whom the foragers shall all repair,
What honey is expected? Degree being vizarded,
The unworthiest shows as fairly in the mask.
The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre
Observe degree, priority, and place,
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office, and custom, in all line of order;
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
In noble eminence enthron'd and spher'd
Amidst the other; whose medicinable eye
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil,
And posts, like the commandment of a king,
Sans check to good and bad: but when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues and what portents! what mutiny!
What raging of the sea! shaking of earth!
Commotion in the winds! frights, changes, horrors,
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixture! O, when degree is shak'd,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
Then enterprise is sick! How could communities,
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,

Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
 The primogenitive and due of birth,
 Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
 But by degree, stand in authentic place?
 Take but degree away, untune that string,
 And, hark, what discord follows! each thing meets
 In mere oppugnancy. The bounded waters
 Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores
 And make a sop of all this solid globe.
 Strength should be lord of imbecility,
 And the rude son should strike his father dead.
 Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,
 Between whose endless jar justice resides,
 Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
 Then every thing includes itself in power,
 Power into will, will into appetite;
 And appetite, an universal wolf,
 So doubly seconded with will and power,
 Must make perforce an universal prey,
 And last eat up himself. Great Agamemnon,
 This chaos, when degree is suffocate,
 Follows the choking.
 And this neglection of degree is it
 That by a pace goes backward, in a purpose
 It hath to climb. The general's disdain'd
 By him one step below, he by the next,
 That next by him beneath; so every step,
 Exemplified by the first pace that is sick
 Of his superior, grows to an envious fever
 Of pale and bloodless emulation:
 And 'tis this fever that keeps Troy on foot,
 Not her own sinews. To end a tale of length,
 Troy in our weakness stands, not in her strength.

It should be noted first of all that the germ of this discourse is to be found in the second book of the *Iliad*, where Ulysses checks the Greeks, who have taken Agamemnon at his word and are rushing to the ships. I quote from Chapman's translation:¹

Stay, wretch, be still,
 And hear thy betters; thou art base, and both in power and skill
 Poor and unworthy, without name in counsel or in war.
 We must not all be kings. The rule is most irregular
 Where many rule. One lord, one king propose to thee; and he
 To whom wise Saturn's son hath given both law and empery
 To rule the public, is that king.

¹ *Iliads* II, 169-175. It is generally agreed that Shakespeare made some use of Chapman's *Homer* in writing *Troilus and Cressida*. This parallel was called to my attention by Professor W. S. Bernard.

We may observe how Shakespeare has elaborated the simple Homeric idea—"let there be one king"—into a complex philosophical discourse in harmony with his conception of Ulysses as the type of profound and subtle councillor. The mere rule of practical wisdom has become a political theory, and in so doing has undergone an essential change. It is not simply that the state must have a single head, but that stability depends upon the preservation, each in its place, of the various orders, and this principle is supported by the idea that "degree" lies deep in the nature of things.

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre
Observe degree, priority, and place.

That the general conception of government expressed by Ulysses is all but universal in Renaissance political theory is well known.² The need of a firm government and of a strict preservation of social ranks was given special emphasis in Shakespeare's day owing to recent tendencies in England toward democratic thought. Tudor theorists supported by Italian writers like Machiavelli and Patrizi, are practically at one in condemning the irresponsible rule of the many. Thus Elyot in *The Governour* advocates monarchy as the ideal system and, following Plato, exhibits the dangers of democracy,³ finding, like Shakespeare's Ulysses, confirmation for his theory in the order of nature. And Spenser demonstrates in the allegory of the giant with scales the fallacy of the doctrine of economic and political equality.⁴

The debt of Renaissance speculation of this sort to ancient political thought is obvious. *The Republic* and *The Politics* furnished later theorists with their best arguments and their chief authorities in their attempt to justify by reason what was already in practice the established social order. The general agreement, therefore, of Ulysses' ideas with the aristocratic principles of *The Republic* is significant only as showing that Shakespeare shared in the common heritage of ancient theory. Furthermore, the anti-democratic drift of the present passage is in harmony with Shakespeare's general point of view as shown in the mob scenes, where the aristocratic principle lies back of and colors the dramatic presentation. But whereas the

² See Lewis Einstein, *The Italian Renaissance in England*, chapter VII.

³ Book I, chap. ii: "For lyke as the communes, if they fele some severitie, they do humbly serve and obaye, so when they embracyng a licence refuse to be bryddled they flynge and plunge: and if they once throwe downe theyr gouvournour, they ordre everythyng without justice, only with vengeance and crueltie. . . . For who can denie but that all thyng in heaven and erthe is gouvorned by one God, and perpetuall ordre, by one providence? One Sonne ruleth over the day, and one Moone over the nyghte." There follows a description of the commonwealth of the bees as the type of a "just gouvernance."

⁴ *Faerie Queene*, Book V, Canto ii, stanzas 30 ff.

precedents for Shakespeare's treatment of the many-headed multitude are, as Professor Tupper has recently shown,⁵ literary and dramatic, the present passage and the kindred exposition of the organization of the state in *Henry V*, involving, as they do, elaborate argument in support of the aristocratic thesis, must be referred directly to the abstract speculation of antiquity and the Renaissance.

A consideration of the particular direction taken by the thought in Ulysses' speech brings us a step nearer to the political doctrine of *The Republic*. The essential feature of the Platonic state as described by Socrates was, it will be remembered, a rigid class division wherein each order does its special work and remains within its bounds. Justice, the object of the Socratic discussion, is defined as doing one's own business and not being a busybody. The state is organized with special reference to war. In it there is no rebelling against authority. "Most truly do we describe temperance as the natural agreement of superior and inferior, both in states and individuals, about which of the two elements shall rule."⁶ Violation of this fundamental organic principle in imperfect states results in confusion: "But when a cobbler or any other man designed to be a trader, having his heart uplifted by wealth or strength or the number of his followers, or any like advantage, attempts to force his way into the class of warriors or a warrior into that of the legislators and guardians, for which he is unfitted . . . this meddling one with another is the ruin of the state."⁷ This doctrine of a special work for each order of society, supplying, as it does, the true philosophical basis of the idea of rank, appears to underlie Ulysses' argument. It is suggested in the phrase "the specialty of rule"⁸ and in the lines describing the celestial system. The planets observe "office and custom"; the sun has the special part of guiding and controlling the rest.

This idea is merely implicit in Ulysses' speech. It receives full elaboration, on the other hand, in the passage already referred to from *Henry V*, and in terms which unmistakably betray its Platonic origin.

⁵ Frederick Tupper, Jr., *The Shakspearean Mob: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, Vol. XXVII, pp. 486 ff.

⁶ Book IV, *Cap.* 432. My quotations are from Jowett's *The Dialogues of Plato*, second edition, Oxford, 1875, Vol. III.

⁷ Book IV, *Cap.* 434.

⁸ The word specialty occurs in this sense only here in Shakespeare. It is variously interpreted by the commentators: "particular nature" (Schmidt); "essence, principle" (Cunliffe); "particular rights" (Onions). The term certainly carries with it also the notion of special function. The *Henry V* passage quoted above shows clearly that the rights of magistrates were no more prominent in Shakespeare's thought than their duties.

Exeter While that the armed hand doth fight abroad,
 The advised head defends itself at home;
 For government, though high and low and lower,
 Put into parts, doth keep in one consent,
 Congreeing in a full and natural close,
 Like music.

Can. Therefore doth heaven divide
 The state of man in divers functions,
 Setting endeavour in continual motion,
 To which is fixed, as an aim or butt,
 Obedience; for so work the honey-bees,
 Creatures that by a rule in nature teach
 The act of order to a peopled kingdom.
 They have a king and officers of sorts;
 Where some, like magistrates, correct at home,
 Others, like merchants, venture trade abroad,
 Others, like soldiers, armed in their stings,
 Make boot upon the summer's velvet buds,
 Which pillage they with merry march bring home
 To the tent-royal of their emperor;
 Who, busied in his majesty, surveys
 The singing masons building roofs of gold,
 The civil citizens kneading up the honey,
 The poor mechanic porters crowding in
 Their heavy burdens at his narrow gate,
 The sad-eyed justice, with his surly hum,
 Delivering o'er to executors pale
 The lazy yawning drone. I this infer,
 That many things, having full reference
 To one consent, may work contrariously.
 As many arrows, loosed several ways,
 Come to one mark; as many ways meet in one town;
 As many fresh streams meet in one salt sea;
 As many lines close in the dial's centre;
 So may a thousand actions, once afoot,
 End in one purpose, and be all well borne
 Without defeat. Therefore to France, my liege!⁹

The relation between this passage and Ulysses' speech is emphasized by the presence in both of the Platonic comparison of good order in the state to a musical harmony¹⁰ and of the simile of the bees. The elaborate account of the commonwealth of the hive in *Henry V* has

⁹ I, ii, 178-213.

¹⁰ For the idea in Plato see especially *Republic* 431-2 where temperance or the proper agreement of the classes is described as a harmony. The question of the specific origin of the simile in *Henry V* has been much discussed. See J. M. Robertson, *Montaigne and Shakespeare*, pp. 13 and 18. It is unsafe to ascribe it directly to Plato, since the idea is common in later writers. The *Republic* is undoubtedly the ultimate source.

been shown to have its probable source in *Euphues*,¹¹ but Lyly does not, like Shakespeare, use the material to illustrate the way in which "Heaven doth divide the state of man in divers functions" nor does he discuss that point at all. Moreover, Shakespeare has added one striking Platonic feature to Lyly's description, namely an explicit mention of the three chief orders of society—magistrates, merchants, soldiers, corresponding pretty closely to Plato's three orders: guardians (rulers, councillors); auxiliaries (younger warriors); craftsmen, merchants, etc. Lyly mentions no social orders or general classes among the bees. The whole doctrine both of the *Troilus* and *Henry V* passages must have its ultimate origin, independently of Lyly, in *The Republic*. Exeter and the Archbishop in *Henry V* explain in detail the principle of order in the successful state; Ulysses, summing up this principle in the term degree, dwells on the consequences of a violation of it. The passages supplement each other and correspond to two main aspects of the Platonic discussion.

Whether Shakespeare's use of these ideas is founded in whole or even in part on direct knowledge of Plato could, of course, be decided only by the presence of unmistakeable specific correspondences. In view of the frequent recurrence of the Platonic material in Renaissance writers before Shakespeare I am not prepared to maintain very emphatically that such evidence exists. But I do wish to point out a suggestive Platonic parallel in Ulysses' speech which appears to have escaped observation. Before so doing it will be well to discuss briefly and set aside those portions of the *Troilus* passage in which, whether they are originally Platonic or not, Shakespeare may be shown to be employing motives which were familiar and traditional in the literature of the time.

The greater part of Ulysses' speech is devoted to an exposition of the importance of degree in maintaining the social and physical universe.

Take but degree away, untune that string
And mark what discord follows.

In thus setting forth the wreck of the universe resulting from the violation of its organic principle Shakespeare falls into a familiar literary motive, derived ultimately from a commonplace of ancient philosophy. It is unnecessary to multiply instances of the recurrence of this theme. Shakespeare might have been familiar with it in many mediaeval and

¹¹ *Euphues and his England*, Arber's *English Reprints*, pp. 262-3. The parallel was first pointed out by Malone.

Renaissance sources, from Boëthius¹² to Hooker. None of the passages which have been adduced by various commentators can be exclusively set up as Shakespeare's original. Perhaps the closest parallel is Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*, where law as the binding force is substituted for the Democritean love.¹³ But Shakespeare differs somewhat even from Hooker in that with him it is not law, proceeding from the will of God, but the purely social principle of rank which links the universe.

In employing this familiar motive to support the idea of special functions and degree Shakespeare is skillfully adapting it to a context somewhat different from that in which it ordinarily appears. And here we may well turn again to *The Republic*, where Plato's account of democracy, "a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder and dispensing equality to equals and unequals alike," a social arrangement in which the "state falls sick, and is at war with herself,"¹⁴ has an obvious resemblance to Shakespeare's. Note particularly the following details.

How could communities,
Degrees in schools¹⁵ and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogenitive and due of birth,
Prerogative of age,¹⁵ crowns, sceptres, laurels,
But by degree, stand in authentic place.

¹² *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Book IV, Meter VI and Book II, Meter VIII. The latter passage, in which it is said that the universe would go to destruction but for the binding force of Love, is translated by Chaucer in *Troilus and Cressida*, which was one of Shakespeare's sources in the present play. See Book III, lines 1744-1764. Among popular Renaissance sources for the same idea is Castiglione's *The Courtier*, Book IV.

¹³ *Ecclesiastical Polity*, I, iii, 2. The passage is as follows, but see the whole discussion of law in Book I: "If nature should intermit her course, and leave altogether, though it were but for a little while, the observation of her own laws; . . . if the frame of that heavenly arch erected over our heads, should loosen and dissolve itself; if celestial spheres should forget their wonted motions, and by irregular volubility, turn themselves any way as it might happen; if the prince of the lights of heaven, which now as a giant doth run his unwearied course, should through a languishing faintness begin to stand and rest himself; if the moon should wander from her beaten way, the times and seasons of the year blend themselves by disordered and confused mixture, the winds breathe out their last gasp, the clouds yield no rain, the earth be defeated of heavenly influence, the fruits of the earth pine away as children at the withered breast of their mother. . . . What would become of man himself." Rabelais in a passage which also has some detailed correspondences with Ulysses' speech and has been claimed as its source, plays humorously on the same theme, showing that it is the principle of debt which holds society and the universe together. See the discussion in *Shakspeare Jahrbuch* IX, 202 ff.

¹⁴ Book VIII, 556, 558.

¹⁵ Cf. *Republic*, Book VIII, 563. "The master fears and flatters his scholars, and the scholars despise their masters and tutors; and in general young and old are alike, and the young man is on a level with the old." With the lines

"Strength should be lord of imbecility
And the rude son should strike his father dead"

compare *Republic* 574-5, where it is said that the tyrannical son, a product of democracy, would strike his father and mother.

"She (Democracy) would have subjects who are like rulers and rulers who are like subjects. . . . By degrees the anarchy finds a way into private houses, and ends by getting among the animals and infecting them.'

'How do you mean?

'I mean that the father gets accustomed to descend to the level of his sons and to fear them, and the son is on a level with his father, he having no shame or fear of either of his parents.'"¹⁶

That Shakespeare goes beyond Plato in extending the confusion from society, where it is natural, to the physical universe, may well be due to such influences as Hooker and Rabelais and to the common notion, appearing elsewhere in Shakespeare himself, that physical commotion precedes or accompanies troubles among men.¹⁷

But the more striking and essential relation of Shakespeare's thought and Plato's appears in lines 120-129 of Ulysses' speech—"Force should be right," etc., where Shakespeare, by making the corruption of society result from a substitution of will or appetite for reason, touches on the principle by which Plato explains not only the growth of democracy but the consequent development of democracy into tyranny as well. The democratical man gives his desires full sway. Moderation and temperance are banished; insolence, anarchy, and waste take their place. "And so the young man passes out of his original nature. . . . into the freedom and libertinism of unnecessary pleasures."¹⁸ The tyrant is the embodiment in a single person of the lawlessness of the community. The brute appetites in him have gained full sway; "he has purged away temperance and brought in madness to the full." He wins his mastery of the state by championing the lawless indulgence of the populace. It is "insatiable desire of freedom" that has brought freedom to an end, on the principle that the "excessive increase of anything often causes a reaction in the opposite direction."¹⁹

Shakespeare's lines—"Then everything includes itself in power . . . That by a pace goes backward, with a purpose It hath to climb"—might almost stand as a paraphrase of Plato's thought. It is true that Shakespeare does not expressly indicate tyranny as the net result of democracy—the thought would not be particularly

¹⁶ *Republic*, Book VIII, 562.

¹⁷ Horace, *Carm.* I ii; Virgil, *Georgics* I, 466; Macbeth II, iv: *Julius Caesar*, I, iii, 57 ff. Note especially *Lear*, I, ii for parallels with Ulysses' speech.

¹⁸ *Republic*, VIII, 561.

¹⁹ *Republic* VIII, 564.

intelligible to an English audience—but the expressions "Force should be right" and "Appetite an universal wolf" (Compare *Republic* VIII, 565-6, and III, 416, where the tyrant is spoken of as a wolf) strongly suggest that the idea might have been present in his mind and colored his language.

The lines about justice, too, have a Platonic sound. It is in the pursuit of the idea of justice that the Socratic discussion is carried on. Thrasymachus defines it as "the interest of the stronger" ("Force should be right"), and exalts the tyrant, who is the embodiment of injustice and wrong, as the happiest of men. The expression "right and wrong, between whose endless jar justice resides" suggests the tentative definition proposed by Glaucus, that justice is "a mean or compromise" between the absolute good and the absolute bad, a middle point "tolerated not as a good but as the lesser evil."²⁰ I would not press this point, however, since Shakespeare's phrase is obscure and may mean simply that justice is a buffer or arbiter between the contending forces of right and wrong.

To the general question of the likelihood of Shakespeare's having read *The Dialogues* I have nothing to add to the considerable body of material which already exists on this point. No English translation is known to have existed in his time, but the complete text was accessible in Latin and Italian, and a French version of *The Republic* had appeared not long before the date of *Troilus and Cressida*.²¹ It is interesting to note that the closest parallel between Plato and Shakespeare ever brought forward occurs elsewhere in this very play.²² Even this has not passed unchallenged but neither has it been entirely discredited. It is in *Troilus*, too, that an opinion of Aristotle is put into the mouth of Hector. May it not be that in this Greek play Shakespeare saw fit to introduce an atmosphere, a touch at least, of Greek philosophy and dipped into Plato as well as Homer by way of preparation for his task? The touch of Platonism is there, at any rate, both in Ulysses' address to the chieftains and later in his dia-

²⁰ *Republic* II, 359.

²¹ Le Roy's version, 1600. This translation is inaccessible to me. It is discussed with reference to Shakespeare and quoted from by Thomas Tyler, "Hamlet and Plato's *Republic*" (*Academy*, Vol. LIII; June 25, 1898). Tyler's argument for borrowings from *The Republic* in *Hamlet* is interesting but inconclusive.

²² *Troilus and Cressida* III, iii, 94-111. For the vexed question as to whether this passage is based directly on the corresponding one in Plato's First Alcibiades or on an echo of Plato in Davies' *Nosce teipsum* or on some other derivative source see R. G. White, *Studies in Shakespeare* (Boston, 1886), *Glossaries and Lexicons*, p. 299; Churton Collins, *Studies in Shakespeare*, p. 33; J. M. Robertson, *Montaigne and Shakespeare*, pp. 97-104; Emil Wolff, *Francis Bacon und seine Quellen*, pp. 100-102. When all has been said against the Platonic parallel it is difficult to shake off the notion that the "strange fellow" is Socrates.

logue with Achilles. The specific lines in the latter passage which have been held to be derived from the *First Alcibiades* may or may not be closer to Davies than to Plato, but the whole conversation has much the air of a detached philosophic discussion in the shades of Academe. And in the speech on degree Ulysses plays the part not merely of the shrewd and subtle councillor but of the political thinker who bases his rule of action, in the ancient philosophical fashion, on the nature of the universe, the constitution of society, and the fundamental laws of human nature.

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